

Comparison of Yuan and Ming China

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Between the 13th and 17th centuries, two very different dynasties ruled over China. One was a foreign dynasty established by the Mongol ruler Khublai Khan (r.1260-94) which he called ̈Yuan,̈ a name referring to a passage in the *Book of Changes* which means ̈primal,̈ and this dynasty lasted from 1271 to 1368.¹ The other dynasty was a native Han Chinese dynasty founded by an upstart military opportunist called Zhu Yuanzhang (r.1368-1398), and he named his dynasty the Ming meaning ̈light.̈² Though it comes as no surprise that the rule of a foreign dynasty would differ dramatically from that of a native dynasty, there are similarities as well. There are also lessons that can be learned from this period that illustrate the perseverance of the Chinese and their ability to adapt to the changing policies that the ruling dynasties, no matter what its background, used in its governing of a large and diverse region. These differences and similarities can be found by examining changing political, social, economic, and cultural issues of China over these periods.

Similar to previous dynasties, the Yuan and Ming came to power in a way that would be considered typical in the dynastic cycle theory, each capitalizing on turmoil and civil war to rise to power. For Khublai, the process of gaining power had begun with his grandfather Chinggis (c. 1162-1227) when he consolidated the Mongol tribes and subjugated North China which was held by other foreign groups, the Tanguts, Khitans (Xia), and Jurchens (Jin) forcing the native Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) further to the south where Khublai would defeat them in 1279.³ In 1351 Zhu Yuanzhang took advantage of the turmoil of the late Yuan and rose through the ranks of a rebel group called the Red Turbans, a militant Maitreya Buddhist group that propelled him to ascendancy.⁴ As with previous dynastic founders, these men used force to gain the Mandate of Heaven. A key difference between the two dynasties was the administration of China. Though the Mongols kept some Song structures in place at the county and prefectural levels, they changed the government most by putting foreigners in positions of authority over these levels and the new provincial level.⁵ The Han Chinese were placed at the bottom level of Mongol society while Mongols, Muslims and other Central Asian peoples handled the responsibilities of running the day to day business of the land.⁶ The Han Chinese during the Ming did their best to drive out the Mongols and their foreign administrators, and preferred to have a group of people that had helped administer previous native dynasties have a role in Ming administration. This group was the Eunuchs, men who were thought to have no dynastic ambitions for obvious reasons and therefore were more trustworthy.⁷ That is not to say that elite Han families did not have any influence in the Yuan or Ming periods. The story of Zhao Mengfu and his recruitment of southern scholars show that the Khan did have use for Han Chinese people in his administration.⁸ The re-instatement of the civil servant exam by the late Yuan favored Mongols and foreigners as well, but the proliferation of these restrictions by the Ming for Chinese officials indicates that the Ming shifted to rely heavily on the native ̈literate,̈ especially in the provinces, a detail that the Ming kept from the Yuan.⁹ Perhaps one of the most long lasting aspects of the political legacies of both the Yuan and the Ming is that they made

¹ Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *China: A Cultural, Social, and Political History*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 148.

² Lecture, September 29, 2010.

³ Ebrey, *China*, 139.

⁴ Ibid., 159.

⁵ Lecture, September 27, 2010.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lecture, September 29, 2010.

⁸ Ebrey, *China*, 155.

⁹ Ibid., 152.

their capitals on or near Beijing where Khublai Khan and the Yongle Emperor (r.1403-1425) built palaces that showed the people their power.¹⁰ It appears that for as different as the Mongols and Han Chinese were in many aspects, they both were not contrary enough to throw away the political systems that seemed to work.

True to the dynastic cycle theory, life under the Yuan and Ming established their power changed only slightly. Chinese people began to settle back into their normal occupations as farmers, merchants, and artisans. Artisans and merchants were especially encouraged under the Yuan by receiving tax remissions and a rise in status.¹¹ During the Ming, the importance placed on the examinations showed that the status of the intellectual once more overshadowed the peasant farmer, artisans, and merchants in the same way as previous native dynasties. Though the status of civilians changed from the Yuan to the Ming, the status of the military class changed little. The Ming kept the institution of hereditary obligation, similar to the Yuan policy of hereditary occupations, which was a remnant of Yuan military administration which depended on a military class instead of the previous practice of recruitment by the Song.¹² The implication of this in Ming times was that as the military class grew, they were not allowed to ply at other trades and therefore become idle persons supported by the state.¹³ One important reaction to the problems of class division in Ming times was the development of lineages which bound ancestral families together regardless of their class or occupation.¹⁴ The members of these lineages could have a wide range of roles but work for common goals which would benefit all the members and bring honor to the family.¹⁵ These lineages show that family remained important for the Chinese people and this importance was not affected by Mongol rule.

The economies of the Yuan and Ming dynasties also had their differences and similarities. The Mongols, like other foreign invaders at first looked to plunder China of its riches, but as they settled in China they needed to try to develop an economy based on agriculture and trade. Muslim and Christian merchants flowed into China during the Yuan period and even Han Chinese merchants were encouraged to carry on their trade. Khublai Khan also made efforts to help trade by public works projects like extending the Grand Canal to the capital and by reducing tariffs.¹⁶ The use of paper money that could be traded in for silver left by the Song became even more widespread during the Yuan dynasty.¹⁷ Yet for the openness of trade and encouragement of peasant workers, the Yuan had economic obstacles that the native Ming dynasty eventually tried to avoid. The expense of customs houses, protecting trade routes, and keeping garrisons to keep the Chinese under control combined with the expenses of foreign campaigns led to high taxation and civil unrest in the late Yuan. The early Ming years in many ways extended the economic philosophy of the Yuan. Zheng He's (1371-1433) voyages are evidence that Ming China looked to open their markets to the kingdoms throughout South Asia in the same way the Mongols had opened their markets to the Silk Road. The large population that migrated south when the Mongols came also spurred the Jiangnan region to emerge as

¹⁰ Lecture, September 27, 2010. & Lecture, September 29, 2010.

¹¹ Lecture, September 27, 2010.

¹² Ibid., 160.

¹³ Lecture, September 29, 2010.

¹⁴ Ebrey, *China*, 172.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Lecture, September 27, 2010.

¹⁷ Ibid.

China's commercial heartland.¹⁸ Another stimulus to the economy made it possible for people in the villages to exercise a degree of control over taxes with the *lijia* system put in place by the Ming.¹⁹ As the economy picked up and the population soared, this growth needed something to feed it. For China, Silver was what this growth depended on and its supply began to run thin. Unlike the Yuan, the Ming took steps to have an inward economy, or at least limit foreign trade by taking state control over it in the mid-15th century.²⁰ But, the need for silver in the Chinese economy made foreign trade impossible to avoid, and piracy and smuggling undermined state control anyhow.²¹ New World crops also found their way to China and helped with the demographic boom.²² Despite these exceptions, China remained a relatively closed market compared to Yuan times. Ironically, one of the few outsiders China officially traded with was the Mongol decedents of the Yuan emperors, who raided North China and induced the Ming to accept trade with their northern neighbors.²³ If there is one conclusion that fits both dynasties and their economic problems, it is that they both grew too large for their own economies. The Yuan's growth to the edges and the Ming's inward growth stressed both systems.

One of the policies of the Yuan which the Ming or any other native dynasty for that matter did not retain was the Mongols' openness to different cultures and religions. Part of the reason the Mongols were able to control an area from Korea to the Black Sea was their willingness to accept and accommodate people of all sorts after they had subjugated themselves to the Mongols. The Chinese were no exceptions to this and, with the exception of losing the examinations and not being able to control their own country, they were left to go about their lives in their traditional ways. Again, Chinese artists, especially painters, were encouraged by Khublai Khan and China enjoyed a "Gold Age of Theater."²⁴ Though Daoism and Confucianism (why study Zhu Xi if there are no exams?) declined under Mongol rule, Islam, Buddhism, and Nestorian Christianity enjoyed the support of the Khan as well.²⁵ Though not as tolerant of foreign religions as the Yuan, the Ming Dynasty still produced philosophers like Wang Yangming (1472-1529) who contributed to the Neo-Confucian cannon. The Ming even allowed western Christians like the Jesuits, most famously, Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), to remain at court as trusted advisors and tutors. Instead of the theater and painting, the Ming was most characterized by the novel. The four great Ming novels, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin*, *Journey to the West*, and *The Golden Lotus* reflect the freedom artists had to express their observations and mix them into fantasies.²⁶ In other ways Chinese culture remained relatively unchanged as well. For example, porcelain, silk, and embroidery remained important parts of Chinese material culture through Yuan and Ming China. Filial piety, concubinage, and footbinding also remained an important part of Chinese culture through both periods. Chinese cultural progress in general appears to have survived the Yuan intact and then thrived even further under the Ming.

Compared to other foreign occupations in history, the Mongol Yuan Dynasty does not have the same sharp contrasts with the following native Ming Dynasty as we might expect.

¹⁸ Lecture, September 29, 2010.

¹⁹ Ebrey, *China*, 172.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Lecture, September 29, 2010.

²³ Ebrey, *China*, 164.

²⁴ Lecture, September 27, 2010.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Lecture, September 29, 2010.

When the nomadic Mongols settled on ruling a Chinese state they really were learning how to run a sedentary society, and learned by following the framework that was already in place. The Mongols were not even the first ones to do this in Northern China; they were following the Xia and Jin who had in turn based their administration on that of the native Song. The transition from one dynasty to the next has traditionally always been a bloody one. The transitions that surrounded the rise and fall of the Yuan and Ming were bloody as well and fit the dynasty cycle theory well. Yet the foreigners did not cause a genocide or mass migration that forever changed the ethnic make up of China proper. In fact it seems that the Chinese people's reaction was nearly the same to the rise of the Yuan as it was to the rise of the Ming. There were differences and developments from each dynasty that changed China, and left an undeniable legacy in China. Yet neither dynasty changed the landscape of China, only built upon it.